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ABSTRACT

Recognizing students' claims of boredom could help teachers in the development of a pedagogy which can account for students' negative learning experience. Fostering students' engagements with their study involves the willingness to problematize pedagogic practice, that is to see how rhetorical beliefs make themselves known in how and what is taught. When students are invited to consider language as an instrument for thinking, their imaginative (thinking) engagements are set underway very differently from when students think of language as bits of information to be internalized or memorized. When students are given the responsibility for creating meanings, they can become imaginatively engaged. Teachers should (1) reclaim complicity in manufacturing instructions which invite students to behave as consumers of ideas; (2) be as comfortable with posing questions as with creating solutions; and (3) keep theory and method thoroughly speculative. (MS)

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Boredom and the Pedagogy of Responsibility

The two parts of my title are meant to suggest both a central opposition in learning--the tension between boredom and engagement, and to suggest the dialectical tension between the experience of students (how they see themselves as bored learners) and what we can do, as teachers, to invite students to reclaim their responsibilities as learners, to become "unbored" as it were. If we are willing to recognize our students' claiming themselves as bored learners, we'll better be able to develop pedagogy which can account for their experience. But, to foster students' engagements with their study involves our willingness to problematize our pedagogic practice--to see how our rhetorical beliefs make themselves known in how we teach what we teach. How, for instance, do our pedagogies make boredom possible? What are our responsibilities in making practice responsive to how our students conceive of themselves as speakers, or listeners, or writers, or readers?

I began exploring boredom--and its attendant issues--having listened to many students speak of classes they were taking, texts they were reading and texts they were composing. I'm an inveterate eavesdropper and what I heard--especially from people emerging from classrooms--was talk about boredom. Many students assess their experiences according to a kind of thermometer of boredom. It runs up and down a scale, the mercury being pushed along by the quantity of "entertainment" or "ease" a student feels filled with. So-called "boring" lectures aren't able to "make learning fun" as my students typically complain.

What they also mean is that certain listening and reading aren't very "palatable" (to use Sartre's digestive metaphor of education); the "information" can't be "acquired" as easily or as readily as wanted. The passive, non-expectant attitude toward oneself as a learner isn't, I'm afraid, simply the attitude of an immature and unmotivated student--though those are the explanations we often hear regarding students' malaise. Though a student's withered expectations of herself as a reader--her lack of a desire to engage herself with others' texts, others' language--certainly fuels boredom, a passive and reactive posture toward oneself as a language-using creature has been fostered by rhetorical views which make reading, for instance, a matter of "information acquisition" make speaking and writing mere "information exchange". Positivist ideas, I'd suggest, shape students' expectations of themselves as

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readers, writers, speakers, and listeners such that the act of learning (what can be an act of transformation, great power, change and invention) becomes, merely, the act of filling oneself with knowledge already-formed, coming at readers in the form of "manageable units" as textbooks typically like to present knowledge. Hear, for instance, what one popular doom-sayer (E.D. Hirsch, in Cultural Literacy) has to say of bored students: "Learners have a very limited channel capacity at any moment of time. Their circuits can get very easily overloaded if they are asked to perform several unfamiliar tasks at the same time." Frighteningly, many of my students have also come to accept this positivist explanation, to abbreviate their minds to mere "brains," as storehouses of the stuff of teachers and texts. Sartre also went on to say, by the way, that textbooks resembled feedbags more closely than anything else. When they speak of the activity of study, I hear students speak of "input" and "retrieval", of "absorbing" and "giving back". These metaphors have been encouraged by confusing the human mind with either the animal brain (which certainly interprets, but cannot interpret its interpretations; animals don't "wonder") or with information-processing technology: computers cannot imagine--they have no way of thinking about their thinking, of evaluating their evaluations, of assessing their assessments. Academic culture has done little to encourage a view of language study which can account for boredom, or which can, on the other end, account for how it is that humans find reading and writing valuable or worthy, how it is they become "engaged", how such activities or making meaning "matter" for them.

As long as we reduce the efficacy of language as instrument of learning to its status as signal code or sign-function (as long as we imagine the act of listening or reading to resemble the "reception of input"), we deprive language of its creative and re-creative capacity as our chief instrument of thought, as our principal "speculative instrument," as I. A. Richards called it. Language has both a symbolic and a social nature. When we find language (when we read or listen to what others are saying) we are faced with the responsibility of making our experience of others' language mean, of bringing to language whatever efficacy we delegate it to have. Because of this responsibility and responsiveness we have as meaning-makers, reading and listening, for instance, are never passive acts; meaning doesn't come ready-made; it doesn't reside "in" language. We enable language to mean and students can sense both the freedom and responsibility of themselves as meaning-makers when our pedagogy invites engagement, when we give our students the responsibility of "reading and writing the world." In other words, when students are invited to consider language as an instrument for thinking, their imaginative (thinking) engagements are set underway very differently from when students think of language as bits of information to be internalized or memorized. But, we cannot expect students to be desirous of making meaning if we don't ask them to do so, if our pedagogy itself doesn't make this possible.

We can begin with certain difficult questions: How do we encourage students to use language as speculative instrument? How do we encourage students to take active roles in making meaning? How do we invite students to develop habits of mind based in wondering, questioning, and then (as importantly)

expecting to discover how to problematize situations they find themselves in as composers of meaning? How is it that our rhetorical beliefs can assume listeners or readers might become bored in the first place?

Boredom is a positioning of oneself in the world. It is a "rhetorical" stance insofar as it speaks to a kind of interaction (or absence of interaction) a thinker has with the world. Boredom is created when we sense our interaction with speaking or writing isn't worthwhile, or isn't possible, when we can't make what we are looking at "mean". It is the result of struggle, re-cast as frustration. Boredom is a way of subsuming a text, but not assuming a critically active posture in response to it. Boredom is, in other words, muteness--the self closed off from its interactions with the world. It arrives when we determine we have nothing to learn, or when we decide what we are hearing ourselves and others saying has nothing to teach us (teachers are especially susceptible to this, listening to themselves at the lectern). Essentially, boredom is monologic, non-conversational. It thrives as privatization, self-interest, self-reliance. I might go so far, even, to suggest boredom is akin to greed: the self unwilling to give of itself, allowing others to come into existence.

Boredom is a choice we make when we are no longer speculative as readers and listeners, when we no longer invite others to speculate with us. Boredom comes when we expect nothing will happen. We create boring texts when we depriciate the role of our audience and assume that their silence and compliance means they are being effectively persuaded. And, we can create boredom as we read or listen non-dialogically, expecting what we hear to provide us with "solutions" and answers rather than our reading's capacity to catalyze new questions. Reading and writing as problem-posing rather than problem-solving may sound dizzying; yet, I know of no quicker way to close down conversation, to kill of dialogue and dialectic than to assume we have arrived at solutions. Imagine what happens in class--what happens rhetorically--when you pose a question to students for which you already have the answer. When we pose such non-questions, we are saying to students: "Learning has little to do with searching and researching meanings in situations of study." We are also saying that learning is filling rather than finding forms, that there is a method for writing or speaking well which will work, irrespective of the practice to which it is put.

When we give our students the responsibility for creating meanings, we are also welcoming them to become imaginatively engaged. That entails reclaiming reading, writing, speaking and listening as activities of the engaged imagination. The work of the imagination is thoroughly speculative, constantly seeking new forms of thought. The work of the imagination is, I'd suggest, the central activity of the unbored. (One of my students said I reminded her of some new kind of right-to-lifer: I want to protect the rights of the unbored!) The imagination, however, was long ago banished to somewhere called the Affective Domain; now, our pedagogies explicitly and implicitly say to students: "When you think, you're being 'cognitive'." They also proclaim: "Cognizant students know exactly where they are going and how

they are going to get there; they have clear goals set. They have put into combination the right number of skills and sub-skills to produce the desired ends." In short, "Cognizant students don't wonder; to be speculative means you are unsure, in doubt." In classes, teachers pose questions and students provide the right responses.

I'm not suggesting that all teachers construct their pedagogies around such lock-step "teacher questions/student answers" method. Still, as long as teachers do most of the questioning, we are perhaps "modeling" the speculative stance for students, but we aren't really inviting students to engage in the kind of learning which engages our imaginative, speculative qualities as thinkers. I'm not suggesting we treat our imaginative capabilities in either a "romantic" or feely sort of way; imagining involves feeling and thinking, or better--forms of thought and feeling are born both from the engaged imagination at work. Feeling and thinking have always happened together when we are not bored as language-users.

It is interesting to note, however, how deep the cognitive-imaginative distinction (fostered by some psychologists and most educationists) has cut into our conceptions of study as an action which can matter for students. When my students find out I am interested in what they are thinking, they say to me: "Oh, you want to know how we 'feel'." Translated, that means teachers haven't valued engaged thought from their students. Also, students haven't been invited to take an active part in their own composing meanings. Somehow, the idea that someone's thought in class can matter--both to herself and to others--has generally escaped us as teachers.

Recently, I invited my students to create conversations surrounding the issue of boredom. I invited them to take charge of the bored response, the lack of responsibility, by asking them how it is possible they can be bored--in many situations. They told me of situation after situation where they found themselves asleep in classrooms, behind desks and behind books, seeking notes which might, later, make the whole action of study worthwhile and "real". Real study precedes tests, mostly--when the opportunity for speculative reading longer exists and the more passive actions of memorization can predominate. Students began to see that they had little or no active involvement in their own listening or reading. Together, we attempted to problematize metaphors for listening and reading we were hearing: what is involved in an act of reading as "absorption," "digestion," "input," "fact-mongering"? How else might we conceive of reading and listening--how else can we think about how we think when we are in active in studying?

I remember at least two new conceptions emerging from conversations: one--that students had a degree of control over creating boredom; and, two--anyone had the right to become speculative, to pose questions, to wonder, to become engaged. It is a powerful change when students move from seeing reading as "efficient information acquisition" to seeing reading always as an act of speculation. Anytime we find ourselves interacting with our world--speaking or writing it, listening to it, especially, we look into it (speculate means not just looking at, but exploring by means of something; in our case, by means of

language). When we read, we aren't always sure what we'll discover, but that we will discover something is "expected". I have come to call this action expectant speculation. Expectant speculation means that we pose questions not simply to critique what we are hearing or reading, but that we work to make others' language mean. Expectant speculation makes reading a thoroughly dialogic enterprise; we need to carry on conversations with others (virtual or actual) in order to create meaning "between" us. Conversation emerges from the mediative function of reading which is, necessarily, social and dialogic. When we act as readers or listeners and are expectantly speculative, we are conscious of our role in bringing meaning to life. Readers and listeners make meaning by creating interpretative paraphrases of what they hear, of forming near-translations to postion alongside the text the writer or speaker is create. Reading and listening become acts of composing, as well. Reading and listening as expectant speculation mean we need to be comfortable with wondering--with paraphrasing again and again what others are saying to us, with forming and re-forming the work of interpretation and being comfortable with ambiguity and with the ways meanings are multiple, plural, various.

One pedegogy of responsibility, also a "pedegogy of knowing", has been in practice for quite some time and is worth our close scrutiny if we are reallly to take charge of our students' sense of themselves as bored learners. Earlier, I spoke of "reading and writing the world". That phrase is Paulo Freire's, the Brazilian educator whose work in literacy can help us to reclaim the action of study as an action of engagement. Here is a passage from his Pedegogy of the Oppressed, where method, model, and theory are all consonant with the idea that study is an act of transformation and power when it is an act of speculative inquiry as well:

> Humen existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them an new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. But while to say the true word--which is work, which is praxis--is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone--nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. Dialogue is the encounter between men mediated by the world, in order to name the world (76).

Or, more recently, Freire has reminded us that "reading always involves critical perception [which is never neutral], interpretation and rewriting what is read" (Freire and Macedo, 36). Rewriting is also a suitable metaphor for listening when listeners aren't bored, when speakers are equally eager to have what they are saying transformed and made empowering by listeners. The unbored are alive--alive to the act of study as "a curious act of the subject, facing the world", and "a form of existing" (Freire and Macedo, 78). Perhaps, "reading and writing the world," having the imaginative powers to re-read and to re-write it is our constituent form of engagement--of living a life worth bringing to life. If boredom is, as Walker Percy (in some delightful speculation) suggests: "the self stuffed with itself," the engaged self, the speculative student, is a self eager for the reach and recognition of others. Boredom, then, is

the silencing of the self in a world denied, with its word denied.

We might think of both reach and recognition as the central activities of the unbored. Reach and recognition implicate us, as readers and listeners, in the making and re-making of meaning which is always an action of responsibility. Reading and listening are active and responsible as long as we invite students to take charge of boredom wherever they have created it. We, as teachers, must reclaim our complicity in manufacturing instructions which invite students to behave as consumers of ideas. We must learn to welcome all that comes with the unbored: to be as comfortable with posing questions as we are with creating solutions, to keep our theory and method in teaching thoroughly speculative, mostly uncertain, but constantly on the move.

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